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Trends, Challenges and Developments in Jewish Latin American Film

Abstract

This article surveys the specialized field of Jewish Latin American film, detailing its foundational years, current challenges and potential future developments. Beginning with the field's origins and early pioneering work, it tracks how scholars have addressed Jewish representation in Latin American cinema, underscoring milestones such as the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches and comparative studies. The article presents the challenges and opportunities that the field faces, including difficulties in accessing films, the impact of global streaming platforms on academic research and assessment of the role of women in film. By highlighting future research directions, the discussion offers insight into how Jewish Latin American film can deepen our understanding of cultural, religious and social dynamics, both within the region and in a global context. It concludes that despite being a focused research area, Jewish Latin American film has the potential to significantly contribute to the broader field of religion, film and media by expanding the scholarly focus to cover a region that has often been marginalized in global academic discourse.

Keywords

Jewish Latin American Cinema, Jewish Identity, Jewish Women in Film, Jewish Diaspora, Gender Identity

Biography

Mirna Vohnsen is a Lecturer in Spanish at Technological University Dublin, Ireland. She is the author of *Portrayals of Jews in Contemporary Argentine Cinema: Rethinking Argentinidad* (2019), co-author, with María Belén Rabadán Vega, of *Eva Perón: A Reference Guide to Her Life and Works* (2021) and co-editor, with Daniel Mourenza, of *Contemporary Argentine Women Filmmaker* (2023), among other studies.

Introduction

The recent expansion of research within the field of religion, film and media has extended beyond the traditional Western focus on the United States and Europe, encompassing additional regions. This shift is significant, as

it recognizes the diverse cultural and religious narratives that have shaped distinct ways to represent cultural identities of the global South in film. This article examines research on Latin American Jewishness and Judaism in cinema in order to highlight the trends, challenges and future developments in this distinctive and burgeoning area of study. Latin America is home to sizeable Jewish communities, with Argentina housing approximately 171,000 Jews and Brazil around 90,000, making them the fifth and ninth largest Jewish populations in the world, respectively.¹ These two countries, along with Mexico, boast the largest film industries in the region. While Argentina began depicting the Jewish experience in its cinema as early as the 1930s, followed by Mexico in the 1970s and Brazil in the 1990s, it was not until the late 20th century that the portrayal of Jewish life, culture and characters gained significant momentum across all three countries.

The societal, religious and political changes undergone by the Latin American nations over the past 40 years have precipitated a notable increase in the production of films and television series that depict minority groups, including Latin American Jews, that had previously been underrepresented. As a result of these developments, the cinematic exploration of cultural and religious identities within the Latin American Jewish communities has garnered considerable scholarly attention, although it remains in its nascent stages. This area of study continues to grow, opening new lines of inquiry as more films and shows portraying onscreen Jews and their experiences are produced. Although the study of Latin American Jewishness and Judaism in film occupies a marginal position within the fields of religion and media studies and Latin American film studies, pioneering scholars and filmmakers have laid a solid foundation. Future research is set to expand through increased accessibility to online platforms, the growing involvement of women in the film industry, the exploration of documentaries, as well as transnational and intercultural approaches, thereby enriching our understanding of Jewish Latin American experiences in film. For most of the 20th century, Latin American films largely overlooked the religious aspects of Jewish identity, but expressions of the Jewish faith have become more conspicuous in the 21st century. This historical lack of religious representation has resulted in most critical studies focusing on the cultural aspects of Jewishness rather than on Judaism itself, a noteworthy trend that has characterized this research area since its inception.

1 Staff 2023.

Foundational Years

If, as Marvin D'Lugo, Ana M. López and Laura Podalsky note, “Latin American film studies as a serious field of intellectual and artistic inquiry is still fairly young”,² the scholarly exploration of Jewish-related films in Latin American cinema is even more nascent, with the first papers written in the 1990s.³ In fact, the 1990s together with the first decade of the 21st century can be considered the foundational years of Jewish-themed Latin American film scholarship. Salomon Lotersztein’s reflection on the scarce representation of Jewishness and Judaism in films despite the notable participation of Jewish filmmakers, actors and screenwriters in Argentine cinema is perhaps the first scholarly contribution to this field.⁴ It was followed by Nora Glickman’s essay examining the representation of Argentine Jewishness during times of authoritarian government.⁵ Glickman compares a film with a novel, suggesting that through the process of self-referential writing, screenwriter Aída Bortnik and writer Mario Goloboff come to terms with their own Jewish Argentine identity. While the significance of these two critical studies should not be overlooked, the foundational and productive work of Tzvi Tal and Carolina Rocha added a crucial transnational dimension to the scholarly discourse. Like their predecessors, Tal and Rocha initially approached Jewish-themed films through the examination of national cinemas. Tal published an article on the Brazilian film *OLGA* (Jayme Monjardim, BR 2004), discussing the allegorical representation of Jewish-German Olga Benário Prestes, who lived in Brazil and was deported to Nazi Germany, where she died.⁶ His analysis reveals how the film strips the protagonist of her Judaism and communist ideology, transforming her into a holy Christian figure. Rocha focused on the celebrated “Ariel trilogy”, composed of the films *WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH* (*ESPERANDO AL MESÍAS*, AR/ES/IT 2000), *LOST EMBRACE* (*EL ABRAZO PARTIDO*, AR/ES/IT/FR 2004) and *FAMILY LAW* (*DERECHO DE FAMILIA*, AR/ES/IT/FR 2006), all directed by Jewish Argentine filmmaker

2 D’Lugo/López/Podalsky 2018, 1.

3 Beyond the Latin American context, the field of Jewish film studies began to take shape in the 1980s, primarily concentrating on two areas: Holocaust representation and the depiction of Jews in films. See Abrams 2012, 15.

4 Lotersztein 1990.

5 Glickman 1996.

6 Tal 2006.

Daniel Burman, to discuss Jewish masculine identity.⁷ In 2008, Rocha revisited the trilogy to examine how Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of Buenos Aires relate to the urban space.⁸ However, in the same year, Tal inaugurated a transnational approach by crossing both national and ethno-religious borders in order to compare cinematic representations of Jewish and Palestinian identities in Argentine and Chilean cinema.⁹ Tal returned to a nation-based approach to offer a panoramic view of Jewish representation in Argentine cinema, discussing numerous films but delving mostly into *CHEESE FACE – MY FIRST GHETTO* (*CARE DE QUESO – MI PRIMER GHETTO*, Ariel Winograd, AR 2006) and *TO BUILD A HOMELAND* (*HACER PATRIA*, David Blaustein, AR 2007) to equate the Jewish family with the Argentine family.¹⁰ Rocha, for her part, adopted a transnational approach with her article “Jewish Cinematic Self-Representations in Contemporary Argentine and Brazilian Films”.¹¹ As the title suggests, the article focuses on Jewish-Brazilian and Argentine filmmakers who depict their own Ashkenazi communities in São Paulo and Buenos Aires, respectively, in order to explore Jewish identity in 21st-century Latin America.

The foundational period of Jewish Latin American film has been characterized by scholarly works that focus on cinematic representations deeply connected to the filmmakers’ personal experiences, with autobiographical elements prominently featured in the films. This autobiographical emphasis has consistently shaped the actual presence of Jewishness in Latin American film since its inception. Additionally, the dynamic interplay between critical approaches that prioritize either the national or transnational dimensions of Jewish Latin American cinema has been a defining trend, continuing to influence studies in this area to the present day.

Recent Research

With authors hailing from disciplines such as literature, cultural studies, history, women’s studies, Jewish studies, Latin American studies and film

7 Rocha 2007.

8 Rocha 2008.

9 Tal 2008.

10 Tal 2010.

11 Rocha 2010.

studies, the field has witnessed a pronounced increase in interest since the 2010s, alongside an expansion in thematic and theoretical diversity. In addition to the growing number of peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, the period from the 2010s onwards has seen the emergence of interdisciplinary works that offer a comprehensive Latin American perspective through the publication of two special issues, an influential edited volume and two monographs. Raanan Rein and Tzvi Tal edited the first special issue of *Jewish Film & New Media*, devoted to the representation of Jewish Latin Americans in film and television.¹² The evocative title of the introductory essay, “Becoming Part of the Moving Story: Jews on the Latin American Screen”, suggests a process of inclusion that situates Jewish representation and involvement within the narrative fabric of Latin American cinema. This special issue highlights the richness of these depictions, addressing diverse themes such as the directorial work of Jewish women in documentary film production, the concept of *tikkun olam* in the works of transnational Jews, the portrayal of Jewish characters as Others who are concurrently an integral part of the nation in an Argentine telenovela, the scrutiny of Jewish religious rites in Mexican and Chilean cinemas, and the theme of collective memory in Argentine films. This special issue paved the way for subsequent publications that also adopted a Latin American perspective. Such is the case for Nora Glickman and Ariana Huberman’s edited volume *Evolving Images: Jewish Latin American Cinema*, a seminal work in the field.¹³ The volume comprises 15 essays that delve into a wide array of topics, including Jewish identity, incidental Jewishness, memory, violence, sports, Jewish religious revival, the portrayal of Israel in the Latin American imaginary, displacement, interfaith relations and Jewish urban spaces. This groundbreaking publication, which brings together scholars from the Americas, Europe and Israel, incorporates a wider geographical perspective by including essays that focus on North American and Spanish films. Thus, it expands the scope and impact of the scholarship on Jewish Latin American cinema and opens new research avenues, so that the esteemed scholar of Latin American literature and Jewish studies Stephen A. Sadow confidently asserted on the back cover of the book that it “creates a new field of research”.

12 Rein/Tal 2014.

13 Glickman/Huberman 2018.

While the classification of Jewish Latin American film as a field of research remains contentious, it is gaining increasing acceptance among scholars. This is exemplified by the special issue of *PostScript* entitled “Jewish Identities in Latin American Cinema”, edited by Patricia Nuriel and Luca Barattoni, an interdisciplinary contribution that advances the scholarship and unambiguously refers to Jewish Latin American film as a distinct field.¹⁴ Through seven essays, the collection addresses issues of Jewish rural settlement in Argentina, the Shoah, public and private space, violence, belonging and Jewish immigration to the Americas. The noteworthy contribution to the special issue on LGBTQ+ Jews by Gabriela Jonas Aharoni opens a new path of exploration that has received scarce scholarly attention in the context of Jewish Latin American cinema.¹⁵ Lastly, two monographs have advanced the field further. I published a nation-based study on the interplay between Jewish ethnic identity and Argentine national identity in film,¹⁶ while Stephanie Pridgeon adopted a transnational approach to examine cinematic representations of the participation of Jewish Latin Americans in left-leaning revolutionary groups during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷ A further recognition of the importance of this field was demonstrated by the inclusion of articles on Jewish Latin American film and television in the prestigious journal *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies* in 2023.¹⁸ These articles were featured alongside contributions that did not focus on Latin American films, stressing the relevance of and academic interest in this area of study.

As this overview attests, the field of Jewish Latin American cinema has evolved significantly over recent decades and continues to expand, incorporating new perspectives that respond to broader issues of multiculturalism, identity politics, religion, and social integration in Latin America. However, against this rich scholarly backdrop, challenges have become evident in recent years.

14 Nuriel/Barattoni 2019.

15 Aharoni 2019.

16 Vohnsen 2019.

17 Pridgeon 2021.

18 Goldfine/Vohnsen 2023; Kantor 2023.

Challenges and Future Developments

A first significant challenge for the study of films in general is the accessibility of cinematic materials essential for detailed analysis. In the past, films could be acquired through VHS or DVD, but the current landscape presents difficulties in obtaining some films, particularly those that are not widely distributed or archived. Various Latin American cinemas have launched online platforms showcasing national films, such as Argentina's CINE.AR (<http://www.cine.ar/>), Mexico's Cine en línea (<https://cineenlinea.filmoteca.unam.mx/>) and Chile's OndaMedia (<https://ondamedia.cl/>). Unfortunately, these platforms do not gather all the films produced in their respective countries, limiting their utility for comprehensive research. Video-sharing platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube may host some Jewish-related Latin American films, but the availability of these films is often inconsistent, posing a significant challenge not only for sustained scholarly research but also for student instruction. Similarly, major streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ and Prime Video do not make content permanently available.¹⁹ Despite their shortcomings, these streaming platforms have contributed to increasing the visibility of Latin American Jewish communities, reaching audiences outside Latin America. Notable examples include the Amazon Prime-produced series *YOSI, THE REGRETFUL SPY* (*IOSI, EL ESPÍA ARREPENTIDO*, Daniel Burman, AR 2022) and *THE END OF LOVE* (*EL FIN DEL AMOR*, Erika Halvorsen / Tamara Tenenbaum, AR 2022), the Netflix series *COMMUNITY SQUAD* (*DIVISIÓN PALERMO*, Santiago Korovsky, AR 2023) and the Netflix-produced film *REST IN PEACE* (*DESCANSAR EN PAZ*, Sebastián Borensztein, AR 2024). The influence of these platforms on the direction of academic inquiry is significant, as researchers may increasingly rely on series and films available on them to overcome the hurdles associated with traditional film acquisition. As such, while the growing interest and scholarly contributions have enriched the field of Jewish Latin American cinema, the evolving digital landscape presents both challenges and opportunities that must be navigated to sustain and advance this area of research.

Another challenge and opportunity lies in the insufficient attention given to date to the role of women in film. As Jewish Latin American cinema

19 Netflix explains on its website, "Though we strive to keep the titles you want to watch, some titles do leave Netflix because of licensing agreements", <https://t1p.de/41rmu> [accessed 24 June 2024].

continues to evolve, it is crucial to place greater emphasis on the presence and contribution of women both behind and in front of the camera. The increasing participation of women in the Latin American film and television industry is likely to introduce innovative perspectives on the portrayal of Latin American Jews, the aesthetics of films, the exploration of new themes, and women's experiences, prompting changes that will impact scholarly research. Films such as *SISTERS* (*HERMANAS*, Julia Solomonoff, AR/ES/BR 2005), *CAMERA OBSCURA* (*LA CÁMARA OSCURA*, María Victoria Menis, AR/FR 2008) and *THE GERMAN FRIEND* (*EL AMIGO ALEMÁN*, Jeanine Meerapfel, DE/AR 2012), which are directed by women and place Jewish women at the forefront of their narratives, have already garnered some academic attention.²⁰ The already-mentioned Argentine series *THE END OF LOVE*, with its feminist critique of Orthodox Judaism, has the potential to expand Jewish Latin American film by offering new perspectives on the intersection of gender, religion, feminism and cultural identity. Research could focus on how the series challenges traditional representations of Orthodox Judaism, exploring themes such as religious authority, gender roles and the tension between individual autonomy and communal norms. Additionally, an examination of the series' cultural impact will help us understand how it engages with contemporary feminist discourses and contributes to ongoing debates about religious modernity, secularism and the representation of minority religious communities in Latin American media. As more films and television series tackle gender-related themes and their interplay with religion, new avenues of research will likely open up. By the same token, the exploration of LGBTQ+ identities within Jewish communities is a topic that thus far has received limited scholarly attention but is likely to attract more focus in the coming years. A film like *TRANSMITZVAH* (Daniel Burman, AR 2024), which was recently screened at the Cannes Festival and critically examines the intersections of tradition, religion and gender, is expected to draw considerable academic attention. This focus could both broaden the representation of diverse Jewish identities in Latin American cinema and prompt the integration of new theoretical frameworks into the study of Jewish Latin American films.

A less explored yet critically significant format in Jewish Latin American cinema is the documentary film. Despite its relatively limited scholarly attention, this genre holds substantial potential for academic inquiry. Docu-

20 Goldfine 2018; Michelotti 2018; Rocha 2019; Vohnsen 2023; Rocha 2023.

mentaries provide a unique and powerful medium for chronicling Jewish life in Latin America, offering nuanced insight into the intricate interplay of religion, culture, memory and history. The scholarly works of Daniela Goldfine, Carolina Rocha, Ariana Huberman, Stephanie Pridgeon and Débora Kantor have already begun to highlight the value of documentaries in this context.²¹ Through their meticulous analysis of real-life events and personal stories, these scholars show that documentaries serve as invaluable resources for recognizing the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity in Latin America. Indeed, Huberman is currently drafting an article on documentaries about conversion to Judaism in Latin American societies for the forthcoming *Handbook on Judaism and Film*, which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2025. Works on documentaries will enhance our awareness of Jewish life in the region and also contribute to discussions on diaspora studies, religion, politics and transnationalism.

Comparative studies examining representations of Jews in film alongside those of other ethnic groups that have settled in Latin America remain relatively scarce, largely because there are fewer films that portray other minority communities, although this trend is gradually shifting. This type of scholarly work promises valuable insight into how these groups are represented and interact with the majority culture. Expanding this research path to include depictions of other ethnic groups that have a significant presence in Latin America – including Arabs, Asians and Afro-descendants – could enrich our understanding of the multicultural tapestry of the region and especially of its cinematic representation. These types of studies can reveal common themes and divergent experiences among different communities, shedding light on how each group contributes to and is shaped by the national culture. Moreover, these comparative approaches, which could explore how minority groups assert their identities and resist marginalization, can elucidate socio-political issues such as assimilation, multiculturalism, social cohesion and religion. By examining the cinematic depictions of interethnic interactions, scholars can gain insight into the processes of cultural exchange, conflict and cooperation that characterize Latin American societies. In addition, this type of research can contribute to the theoretical frameworks of film studies, ethnic studies, religious studies and cultural studies. It can enhance our awareness of how films function as cultural texts that reflect, construct and challenge social realities. This expanded

21 Goldfine 2011; Rocha 2014; Huberman 2018; Pridgeon 2018; Kantor 2020.

focus promises to deepen our appreciation of the region's rich cultural diversity and the complex interplay of ethnicity, culture, religion and power in its cinematic landscape.

Lastly, comparative studies that extend beyond the confines of Latin America present a promising avenue. Historically, the transnational perspective in this field has primarily involved comparative analyses of various Latin American cinemas. Notably, Nora Glickman has been a trailblazer in broadening this approach to include US cinema, thereby setting a precedent for more expansive transnational inquiries.²² Glickman's pioneering work exemplifies the potential of this research focus to encompass comparative studies that juxtapose the cinematic representation of the Latin American Jewish experience with that of other diasporic communities in countries and regions such as Canada, Europe and Australia, where Jews have a substantial presence. Such comparative studies will shed light on the unique and shared aspects of depictions of Jewish diasporic identities across different cultural and socio-political landscapes. By examining the representation of the Latin American Jewish experience in film in relation to portrayals of other global Jewish diasporas, scholars can uncover how historical, cultural and political contexts shape the cinematic depiction of Jewish identity and community life. This comparative framework allows for a more nuanced awareness of the interconnectedness and distinctiveness of Jewish experiences worldwide as portrayed in cinema. By analysing how different films depict Jewish communities across various global contexts, scholars can identify patterns of adaptation, resilience and cultural exchange that transcend regional boundaries. This provides key perspectives on how diasporic communities navigate issues of identity, belonging and representation in different national and cultural contexts, thus enhancing our understanding of global Jewish experiences as reflected in film.

Closing Remarks

Overall, the study of Jewish Latin American cinema is poised to continue its growth and diversification. By building on the foundational work of pioneering scholars and embracing new comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, this field will certainly offer valuable perspectives on the interplay

22 Glickman 2018.

of ethnicity, culture, religion and media. The focus on Jewish identity in Latin American cinema provides significant understanding of how religious, ethnic and cultural identities are visually constructed and negotiated. This understanding can be extended to other ethnic groups, helping scholars analyse how media shapes and reflects complex identity dynamics. Concurrently, the emphasis on Jewish Latin American films highlights the importance of studying minority religious representations in regional cinemas. This recognition may encourage scholars to explore other underrepresented religious groups in various cinematic traditions, broadening the scope of religion and media studies. Furthermore, the inclusion of gender and LGBTQ+ perspectives in the study of Jewish Latin American film can be expanded to examine how gender and sexuality intersect with religious identities in cinematic representations across different cultures. In sum, although Jewish Latin American film is a relatively niche field, it holds significant potential to enrich the broader discipline of religion, film and media by bringing scholarly attention to a region that has often been overlooked in global academic discourse.

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